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ABSTRACT

The most critical problems faced by widowers include: (1) dealing with the emotional stress of grief and loneliness: (2) re-establishing identity as a single man: (3) recognizing emotional needs: and (4) coping with the stress of role transition. Unlike the widow, the widower goes through the grieving process alone: he needs help in developing skills for coping with the stress of his new role. Such support can be provided through a seminar series which focuses on feelings, new roles, health, sexuality, social life, financial and legal issues, and dating and remarriage. An evaluation of such a program indicated that participants found ways to cope with their specific problems. (RC)

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*MEN IN CRISES: THE WIDOWER

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Author: The Widower, Beacon Press, 1978

TO BE PRESENTED AT THE NCFR ANNUAL MEETING
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MEN IN CRISES

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Approximately 250,000 men annually are left without their wives due to death. There are approximately 2 million widowers in our society at any one time. This is a sizeable portion of our population. Yet widowers remain a neglected group in terms of receiving societal sympathy, understanding or support. They are, in a sense, expected to bury their wives on Saturday, return to work on Monday and the following weekend be "out looking." Family, friends and even professionals seem to believe the myths about how well men handle their grief and other problems subsequent to being widowed. I have been told many times, and often by widows, "Men don't have any problems they can't handle." And thus, we have the "men in crises." The widower's most critical problems are: emotional stress in dealing with grief and loneliness; re-establishing his identity as a single man; joining the living again as he recognizes his emotional needs for companionship and love are there; and for the man still with children in his care, role transition and stress as he takes over child care and household responsibilities once held by his wife.

The most significant immediate emotion felt by the widower is grief. The voice over the phone says, "She's at rest." He is filled with devastating pangs of intolerable aloneness. Then

guilt--he should have been there--then anger (at God - at the doctors - at himself)--as he hit the cupboard with his fist as hard as he could. He had gone through the agony of seeing his wife slowly succumb to cancer. He had spent as much time as was humanly possible with her--yet he was unprepared for the end.

Whether the words telling of the death of a loved one come suddenly, without warning, or after months of knowing the inevitable end, one is unprepared--unprepared to face one's emotions.

Death is a traumatic, stressful situation for anyone, but particularly for the widower because of his inability to get his feelings out in the open, to express his emotions with the exception of anger which society allows him. A man goes through the same grieving process as does a woman; i.e. shock, disbelief, anger, remorse, denial, depression, struggling to recognize the reality of death, acceptance of being single again, and getting active--living again. He must go through this process basically alone. In addition, he seldom has been responsible for running a home; that washing machine and dryer may seem like a strange beast to him. He may be good for that Sunday barbecue, but cooking every meal? And his wife probably was his one confidante and social secretary.

Listen, for example, to what Jim told me: "I am one of those forgotten persons, once married and now widowed. Probably it was because I am a man that everyone thought I could carry on as though nothing had happened after my wife died. My father-in-

law patted me on the back and told me how proud he was of me for being so "brave," when all the while I wanted to cry out how I was hurting inside. No one at work will mention Anne, almost as though she had never existed. The neighbors were so kind during her ilness and right after her death, but now they let me alone. Oh, maybe my children and I will be invited to a Sunday night supper, but why don't they invite me to their Saturday night parties like they did when Anne was alive? What's all this nonsense about people liking to have an extra man around when they have parties? I am really getting desperate trying to find someone to care for my three young children, feeling guilty about my desire to date a woman, having to come home from work to care for kids, cook their dinner and then get them to bed at night. I never was expected to do these things before and sometimes I resent the extra time and energy this takes. And I am so lonesome without Anne to talk with and make love to."

Yes, Jim is in a crisis situation, as are most widowers. And he needs help to find skills for coping with his stress and his new role as a man without a wife. Realizing that there were no books written for the widower about his special problems, I began to gather information about him and his dilemma, for the purpose of writing my book, The Widower.[1] In the process, I discovered that society really does ignore the so-called, "stronger sex" relative to the widow. Many books have been written about and for her. Programs are established by various religious and social groups

[1]Burgess-Kohn, Jane & Willard Kohn, The Widower. Boston: Beacon Press, 1978.

to help the widowed person, but they are participated in primarily by women. When my husband suddenly died of a heart attack, leaving me with two teen-age children, when I was 45, I was astounded and will be forever grateful for the kindness, the help, the guidance offered me by friends and neighbors, some whose names I didn't know. This societal attitude that as a widow, I was really unable to cope by myself, that people must give me continuing support, made it possible for me to recover more quickly emotionally at least from my loss than do most men. Of course, eventually, most of my married friends forgot to invite me to their parties, but a widower generally does not receive the sympathy and continuing support that I was given in the early period of bereavement. Felix Baredo[2] of Washington State University found in his studies too, that men suffer more problems of loneliness and isolation than do women when widowed. He also suggests that men find that adaptation to widowhood is more difficult than do women. Even the frequency of interaction with friends and family declines more rapidly for the widower than it does for the widow.

Bereavement--sorrow is something an individual must work through. It is a cry for help. But to whom can a person turn in his sorrow. How many of you know what a bereaved person is feeling? How many of you know what to say? Do you know how to help a bereaved person? FIRST, we must try to understand the feelings that a person has before we can help him to overcome his grief.

[2]Baredo, Felix, "Social Adaptation to Widowhood Among a Rural-Urban Aged Population," Washington State University, College of Agriculture Bulletin 689 (December 1967).

A widowed person, to overcome grief, must accept the reality of his spouses' death as well as the inevitability of death for everyone. John, for example, told me, "Many of us try to deny the loss of our loved one. We say it didn't happen as we fantasize and imagine she is going to return. During my denial of my wife's death, I frequently found myself having suicidal thoughts about joining her. Playing the game of pretend only delays the trip back to reality. I had to tell myself that she was gone; that I had a new life to lead. I felt a numbness, and it was not until a semblance of routine set in that the reality of what had happend struck home. But to reach this state of acceptance, I turned to professionals for help." John was wise to recognize his inability to cope by himself not as a weakness, but as a need for outside, expert help. (We seek medical advice about our teeth, eyes, why not for depression?)

Once the routine of living <u>alone</u> begins to set in, a new set of feelings are recognized. Any married man who finds himself alone for whatever reason will have this feeling in common--LONELINESS. Just the other evening, for example, after a meeting, Jim, who was known to always be in a rush to get home said, "I may as well stay on for a couple of drinks because there's nothing to go home to. Mary's gone to Virginia to spend a couple of weeks with our daughter and new born grandson. It's hell without her."

Many formerly married men have told me, "The first few weeks and months after separation from my wife, I nearly died of loneliness." Most of them advise: "keep active, remain in contact

with family and friends; make new friends, join organizations for formerly married people. Remember that life is too short to become self-centered."

For any man left alone one day the rude awakening happens! "My God, I am alone," he tells himself. "I'm not a WE anymore. I am a ME. We laughed, we fought, we loved, we cried together--now I am alone. I'm suddenly afraid. I'm filled with self-pity. How, why did this happen to me?"

Realizing the plight of the widower, I began my program exclusively for men, to help them learn to cope. I have been criticized for not including women. My answer to these criticisms is: These men need a place where they can openly express their grief, their fears, their guilt, their anger, their feelings of abandonment; to cry without worrying about being considered weak. Men do not feel free to open their mind and soul in the presence of women. We know that men traditionally are conditioned from childhoood on to be inexpressive. As a child they are reminded "Be a man, don't cry, be like your father." Women, on the other hand, are taught that it is all right to cry, and as adults, we sill have permission to cry and to express our innermost feelings.

In setting up my series of seminars, I had to first delineate the special needs of widowers, recently bereaved, into topics:

1. Feelings and Fears — How can a man cope with his emotions, his guilt, anger, feelings of abandonment, his fears?

2.	The Role of a Man as Homemaker and/or Single Parent	What special problems face a man as he takes over homemaking responsibilities? What are the special concerns of a child left without a mother? How can a father better understand these concerns and deal with them? What role can a single parent play in the lives of his children? What about health and nutritional needs of the children? Of himself?
3.	Health and Sexuality	What happens to a man's emotional and physical health when his wife is gone? What can he do about it? How can he cope with such problems as depression, insomnia, etc.? What happens to a man's sexual drives? How can he cope with sexual needs? How does he handle guilt or fear of failure to perform sexually?
4.	Re-establishing a Social Life	How does a man handle social isolation from his married friends? How can one improve his communication skills? How does one get in touch with social and recreational activities?
5.	Financial and Legal Issues	What happens when there is a will? No will? What should be done about joint property? What about the gift law? In case of remarriage, what legal contracts should a man make prior to marriage? How should property and money be handled to best serve the interests of himself, his second wife and his children? What about good financial planning?
6.	Dating and Remarriage	How can a man prepare himself mentally to date again? What is involved in decisions to remarry? What problems are involved with reconstituting a family?

Second, ways to reach the widowers in our community were determined. Through mailing of a brochure advertising the seminars to widowed men, to professional organizations dealing with families, to clergy of various denominations and to service organizations; and through advertising in the media, we created interest and

participation in these seminars. The coming together of men who find themselves "in the same boat," with professionals who could give them their expertise helped these men cope with their emotions and changes in their lives. The widowers were located through obituary columns in local newspapers and by contacting churches, funeral parlors and service organizations.

Third, the seminars had to be arranged. Specialists in the field of the family were drawn from educational and community organizations to present lectures and lead discussions on each of the various topics. Men who were widowed and have learned to cope were invited to join with the specialists and verify that it is possible to recover from one's sadness and to live happily again.

Two programs were planned, one in the fall to meet on Thursday evenings and one in the spring to meet on Saturday mornings, with each program meeting for six consecutive weeks. Since many men hesitate attending programs held in a church, I would suggest looking for a lounge in an academic setting or community center.

Fourth, an evaluation of a program is important. The previous seminars for widowers have met with great success in meeting is specific objectives. The men who participated found ways to cope with their specific problems. As one man commented when arriving for his second seminar, "If it had not been for our session on grief, and for the comfort I received from all those other men in the same boat, I could not have survived another week." I would say that without this program the participants would need a year to get where they do in just six weeks with our project. The impact is

direct and intense on the feelings of these widowers. I was very satisfied with the level of participation.

In the three programs presented, about 65 men have been reached. If only three had been helped, I would consider the project worthwhile, for how does one put a price on the life of a human being? The outcome of this project should be disseminated to other states, for men everywhere need this kind of support when they are bereaved.

Fifth, I foundthat the widowers attending my seminars felt the need for some follow-up sessions and I have now organized an "Alumni." The men meet for dinner and conversation every other month. Men who are dating or who have remarried bring their gals, and this is marvelous therapy. As one recently bereaved widower said to me, "Sitting across from Al and his wife at dinner, seeing how they are, was the best possible tonic for me. I realized that some day I may find happiness and love again, too."